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P.N.E.U. METHODS OF TEACHING:

with special reference to the teaching
of English.

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IT is a common criticism of the elementary school that the power of expression too often remains largely undeveloped. Questions, by long tradition the very essence of the teacher's method, produce at best but brief replies: free oral expression plays little part, and free expression in writing still less. And, of course, so long as the child's knowledge is only reproduced in answer to questions, however stimulating and suggestive they may be, it is the teacher, the questioner, who is doing most of the thinking: the class, necessarily regarded as a unit, is very apt to commit the charge of its response to its acknowledged leaders, and the general effort is small.

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Now if criticism were to suggest that the teachers of the elementary schools are to blame in this matter, it would be not only ungenerous but ill-informed. They are only doing what a miserly administration founded upon a most injurious misconception of the needs and abilities of the worker's child has forced them to do. The longer my experience, the deeper grows my admiration of the devotion and skill of the teachers. Nowhere will there be found a truer sense of mission, nowhere a greater measure of technical skill in teaching, than in the English elementary schools.

But for three generations the State has imposed an impossible task upon the teachers. For two of them the elementary school was almost bare of books: there was no money wherewith to buy them. And when gradually a few crept in they were but pitiful "readers"—the poorest

type of book that calls itself a book upon the globe. The workers' children must acquire the mechanical art of reading; but they would never read books like other children; they had not the aptitude or the need—such was the belief. False, false and most dangerous. If intellect is at work without information to support it, if taste is defective, if class consciousness is rife, it is but what one would expect—the inevitable consequence of denying to millions of minds their proper nourishment. To this day, though the great masters of our literature are now making their way into the schools, it is too often in an abbreviated form, the material simplified or selected; so difficult is it for teacher-editors to believe that the child can deal joyously and competently with the book as the author wrote it. As for history, Nature knowledge, geography, they are rarely presented in anything but "reader" form, or in anything but text-book English, which is widely remote from both literary English and common speech.

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We have not believed that the child wanted to get knowledge, or could enjoy work. But anyone can see that in early years, before schooling supervenes, it does. Its questions are endless. But in school questions are inconvenient and are discouraged. The teacher must talk, demonstrate, question; he was, and is, trained with great skill to do it. What else could you do if you had no books? The child must be passive; he shall respond to the teacher's initiative, but there is no initiative for him.

Across this tradition, turning it upside down, cut the educational philosophy and the teaching methods of Charlotte Mason (the P.N.E.U. methods), and the rapidly extending experience of the already numerous schools that are following them. Children, she says, are athirst for knowledge. If it is presented to them at first hand by one who really has it to impart, in literary form, they are interested at once. But they must assimilate it, make it their own. For that an effort of concentration is demanded. How shall they be induced to make it? They will do it if they know that after a single reading they must tell the substance of what they have read, or

heard read. This practice of concentration and narration imparts a wonderful power, which few adults possess. Can we repeat in order the essential matter of a speech, a sermon, a leading article, an essay, a chapter of a great novel? The attempt will show that we cannot. But these children can. And because they are always reading good English they use good English, and their vocabulary expands with great rapidity. You will say that every child in a large class cannot possibly narrate what is read. That is true, though not to the extent that you would suppose, for by splitting your class up into groups in a manner to be described later, and by encouraging among the older children the habit of silent narration, and using with all children the many opportunities for written narration, a far larger proportion of your class will narrate than you would expect. Moreover, every child expects to be called upon, and therefore does concentrate.

What the child has read in this way it knows; and it retains its knowledge, as the examination at the end of each term, taken joyously and confidently without any special preparation, proves to the satisfaction of the most sceptical. The copious written answers, in their free and often graceful English, reveal a new power of expression and an unexampled range of knowledge.

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Of course the method is not fool-proof. No defensible method can be. The good teacher gets the best results. Perhaps the most dangerous pitfall is the temptation to develop mere verbal memory. You may find at first, when you read long passages, that your children will not narrate. You must make no concessions to weakness: wait until they do. Believe in this, as in other things, that what Charlotte Mason says the child will do, do it surely will. Have faith. One day—in a week, perhaps, or it may be a fortnight—some child will begin: others will soon follow, and the difficulty is over. If you try to tempt them by shortening the passages read, they will think that you want verbal memory—exact reproduction—and you will get it. But there has been no assimilation of knowledge. That way there can be nothing but disappointment. Never read anything that does not make

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a natural unit, a rounded whole, whether it be a paragraph, a page, or a chapter.

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Never interrupt reading to explain, or narration to correct, or you make concentration impossible. Explain what needs explanation before you begin: correct, or, better, let other children correct, afterwards. But always remember that the child need not see all that the adult sees. Be satisfied, be thankful, if it is interested, if it enjoys what is read. There are long years ahead of it during which it will attain to the maturer point of view. We have ruined the appeal of many a noble masterpiece by explaining, by surrounding it with notes.

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Remembering that Charlotte Mason founded the P.N.E.U. for the child and the governess in the home schoolroom, we understand how those liberal programmes, that arrive each term from Ambleside, came into being. Governess and child were to feel themselves members of a world-wide school. For many years Miss Mason never hoped to include the elementary school. There was no money for the books. But 12 or 13 years ago hope began to dawn. A kind friend gave the necessary books to one school. What Miss Mason said would happen did happen—the children loved them. They showed the same capacity to deal with them without explanation, the same interest, power of concentration, facility in language, readiness to assimilate and use, as any other children. A new bond was being forged between classes, a bond of common interest. And the books delighted the teachers as much as the children. There was a new pleasure in teaching: they were giving a liberal and not a stunted education. The example proved infectious. Many authorities are now experimenting. In Gloucestershire more than 200 schools are following the methods, and by general admission inspectors must have two standards of appreciation—one a high one, for the P.N.E.U. schools, and an entirely different and much lower one for the rest.

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But, you will ask, for what subjects do the programmes

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provide? For all subjects capable of literary presentation, and, also, as education must be rounded and complete, for all others commonly found in the curriculum, and even for some that are not. But in the elementary school we shall most often concern ourselves with the subjects that are capable of literary presentation; narration has no part in arithmetic, handwork, drawing, and we are doing these fairly well already. Picture study we have not heard of, and, as we shall find, narration is beautifully possible there.

History we shall learn—*learn*, not merely read about—ancient and foreign, as well as English; foreign always side by side with English. With the period of history under study will be associated masterpieces of literature, a historical novel of Scott or Lytton or Stevenson, and every term a play of Shakespeare. Where possible, contemporary poetry, contemporary art, contemporary music are included. The child is introduced at every point to the joy of recognition, of comparison, of assembling different points of view and sifting judgments. Geography follows the humanistic and historical method, but the scientific aspect of the subject has due recognition, while constant map study and out-of-doors work are insisted upon. Books of travel are read term by term, and give added interest. Remember what Sanderson, of Oundle, said of geography:—

“An important question which we have been concerned with for at least three years is ‘What is China? What is it like?’ You may say: ‘Methods of teaching geography.’ But who ever learned anything from geography—as geography? Who wants to know geography as geography? Books exist for it, maps, plasticine exist for it. We want to know about China—we shall not get that sort of thing from the geography books. You will have to take the boys and let them find out what men have done who have been in China; to get products from China; to know its geology, and whether, after all, the Chinese do so deeply love rice that they want to live on a very little a day. Do the Chinese love rice? Do they love underselling white labour? Do they want to? That is real geography, but not classroom geography.

That extension of interest, until China is brought into the classroom and the boys are finding out about it, is, I claim, one of the deepest and greatest tasks to be undertaken. China, India, the Durham miners—spacious undertakings.”

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Then there is Citizenship, surely in these days, if ever, a subject of the last importance. Plutarch put before his own children the illustrious examples of devotion and self-sacrifice that are to be gathered from Homer's pages; we turn to Plutarch's "Lives" in Roger North's Elizabethan version. I remember when teachers foretold that the children would not read him—themselves underrating the ability of the workers' children. Triumphant the children dispelled their unfounded pessimism. If there are two authors who have asserted and established their sovereignty in the elementary school, they are Shakespeare and Plutarch (as North rendered him), read without commentary, or any more explanation than the child itself demands. The half that the children take of themselves with joy, is far greater than the whole that ultra-conscientious teachers, stuffed with the notes of commentators would fain force upon them.

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And what shall we say of Mrs. Fisher's *Fairyland of Science*, Professor Turner's *A Voyage in Space*, or *The Story of Architecture*, or Miss Mason's *Ourselves*, of Ruskin and Carlyle, of the masses of poetry read to them beautifully and then narrated simply—read until the sense of rhythm develops, and poetry, real poetry, is written by some? What shall we say, too, of the pictures of great masters studied each term, of the introduction through musical appreciation in some schools to great music? It is a liberal education, and it has the effect on mind that a liberal education always has.

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But these books cost money. How can education authorities hope to provide them? Well, they can do it for about a shilling a head per annum more than they spend now on the rubbish with which the elementary schools are flooded. Of course, you cannot provide a

copy of every book for every child. Some—not many—are read aloud by the teacher. And what a wonderful effect upon the child good reading has. For the rest the class is broken into groups, differing in numbers and size in different schools—three or four or five, or even more. So in a class of 40 you will not have more than 13 or 14 copies of any book, and probably not more than 10. Each group will follow a time-table of its own. Economy dictated the expedient; but it survives on its merits. The teacher cannot dominate a class so broken up. Constant questioning and explanation are impossible. The narration itself will frequently be heard by group leaders. In the room there will always be a subdued murmur of busy voices. The children are active; the initiative is theirs. The exaction of work is hardly thought of in a good school. The children want to do it. Concentration is often so close that they do not notice, do not care, whether the teacher is in the room or not. You may go in and enter into conversation with him, and they will not raise their heads, or pay the smallest attention to you. You do not believe it? Go and see. Conviction has been borne to many in that way.

The demands of an editor have led to the writing of this article against time in a railway train on a Whitsuntide journey to Ambleside, under all the difficulties and discomforts of the present attenuated service. I have not by me the many specimens of delightful work which I gather in my visits to the schools, and use as the most convincing of all arguments when I lecture to teachers.

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One other word. The six-year-old infants during the second half of the year commonly embark upon the programme of the lowest P.N.E.U. form. We do not write down to them, or talk down to them; they will not narrate, or really be interested, if you do. "Our Island Story," Hans Andersen, Grimm, are read to them without alteration, and narration follows. But their own reading! The group method has spread to the infant school. There is no reading round the class. You will often find as many different books as children, and the children read silently, taking their turn in oral practice as the teacher

goes round. The result is that many children not yet seven years old, even in country schools, can read almost any book that you put before them. Their narration is delightful, and as what you can tell orally you can also write, as soon as you can guide pen or a pencil, many children of seven are writing the most amazing composition without any help from the "Aids to Composition," that impede the children in so many schools.

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Of course, if you are going to adopt Charlotte Mason's methods, you must try to understand her philosophy of education. Therefore, read *School Education*, and when you are teaching refer to it constantly. You will also make an effort to see at work a school where the methods are thoroughly understood, and such schools are to be found now in many of the English and some of the Welsh counties. Scotland, so long a pioneer in education, has not yet responded to the new message.

If you want more information you cannot do better than write to the Secretary, P.N.E.U., 26, Victoria Street, London, S.W.1. You will not be disappointed.

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SOME THOUGHTS ON NARRATION

by

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SOME THOUGHTS ON NARRATION

'Narration? Oh yes, that's what they do in P.N.E.U. schools, isn't it? The children just read a bit and then narrate and the teacher does nothing much except listen. Lessons don't have to be really prepared, because everything is there in the books the children read from'.

There are still people who think this is the whole truth even if they have been to see a P.N.E.U. school and have listened to lessons there. Sometimes it may seem that there is little else to it even though the visitor owns with surprise that the narration by the children was really remarkable, and yet the lesson was read only once.

Can P.N.E.U. teaching in school be quite as simple as that?

Almost all children have the deep-rooted desire to tell others about things they have seen or heard—there are rare exceptions—and they all have lively visual imagination, so that what they tell is really what they 'saw' when they read it or heard it. As we grow older, we find that we tend to think over in detail things which make an impression on us, and, when older still, we make ourselves summarise mentally what we particularly want to remember accurately or those arguments we wish to use.

I think it is true to say that narration as practised in P.N.E.U. schools is founded on this power of mind to recall knowledge gained from a single reading or seeing or doing and the fact that such recollection makes so deep an impression on the mind that it remains for a long time and is never entirely lost.

Narration, however, is of many kinds, though always the answer to the question (put mentally): 'What comes next?' Obviously it requires some power of concentration from the first. Very young children, in the nursery class, are not expected to narrate, but often they insist on doing so because of this instinct to 'tell all about it' to somebody. How many of us can refrain from telling that good story we heard yesterday? And anything that must be remembered, do we not repeat it—even if it is only 'First turning to the left and third to the right'? Narration is extraordinarily satisfying to the narrator, though, alas, a little boring sometimes for the listener since he is getting it at secondhand. And second-hand knowledge is . . . but that is another story.

So the youngest children begin, *con amore*, to tell Mummie or baby sister all about it. At about six years old, narration in the school is expected. The stories are such that hardly a child can bear to wait his turn and no tiny detail may be left out. This is, of course, the result of 'involuntary' attention and for some two years little conscious effort to attend needs to be fostered because the child's power of attention is growing all the time and becoming habitual. But is narration, even at this age, always merely 'telling back'? It must be, we know, the child's answer to 'What comes next?' It can be acted, with good speaking parts and plenty of criticism from actors and onlookers; nothing may be added or left out. Map drawing can be an excellent narration, or, may-be, clay modelling will supply the means to answer that question, or paper and poster paints, or chalks, even a paper model with scissors and paste pot. Always, however, there should be talk as well, the answer expressed in words; that is, the picture painted, the clay model, etc., will be described and fully described, because, with few exceptions, only words are really satisfying.

When children reach the middle school other types of narration may be used; they can offer headings to cover the lesson and then narrate by filling in the details under each heading or the class may be divided into small groups with a leader in each one and narrate part of or all the lesson. The responsible teacher should be keenly aware of everything that is going on. Shy children will often narrate in a group or a specially 'mute' child may be given his chance alone with the mistress or a friendly class-mate. There are children—and grown-ups too—who do not willingly talk; often they will narrate well on paper.

At about this stage a lesson should often end with some serious discussion arising from questions asked by the children or by the teacher. One has to be careful not to allow opinions to be formed on too little knowledge; it is an opportunity to show children how dangerous such carelessly formed opinions can be. This teaching develops as the children move up through the school.

Narration, however, is not without its hazards: for example, a keen teacher, in order to 'improve' the lesson, may allow herself to talk, to add in the middle of it all some interesting item from her own experience; or she may not have prepared the lesson quite carefully enough—for narration lessons need very thorough preparation—so that she does not notice till too late that there are names and unfamiliar long words which will bother the class. The lesson is therefore stopped for a minute or two while the difficult words are written clearly on the board and a few words of explanation given. Such interruptions do no less than ruin the very best lesson, the thread of interest and intense concentration has been broken and the class will have great difficulty in picking it up again and keeping to it. Even then, the lesson is broken-backed. So, all names should be on the board directly the introductory question on the previous lesson has been dealt with, and the children should say them over until their tongues find them easy and familiar. As to the interesting extras that the teacher can add, they may either come at the beginning, to arouse interest or curiosity or, generally better, at the end in those few minutes so jealously saved for questions, remarks, etc., which round off the perfect lesson.

By the time children reach the top of the school narration has become an ingrained habit, has led to observation and thought, to an ability to relate what was learnt last term—last week—yesterday—with 'this' that we are now considering. Such co-ordination grows from remembered past narrations over a wide field. Some note in to-day's reading awakes an echo in some other subject or lesson and so the power to compare and contrast and illustrate by example is developed. This should lead to a valuable use of analogy, and application of past history to modern times and modern problems.

There are two more forms of narration which can be practised here: in one, the pupils set questions to the class in such a way as to cover the whole of the lesson. This can be very interesting as there is much art in the setting of a good question. The other form is silent narration. This everyone should master, if only for its usefulness in after school life when one wants to do some serious reading at home or in the course of some form of higher education. Narration in silence needs great concentration, but once mastered it gives the possessor the power of carrying on his education for the rest of his life.